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Editorial

THE CHRISTIAN CONVICTION OF THE GREATNESS OF GOD

We are finding it increasingly difficult to associate many of our experiences with the thought of God. The pain of the world, the wild cruelty of the struggle for existence, the pitiless destruction of man and man's work in the fury of the sea and the fire of the land, the dark abysses of life—these and such things as these tax our faith in the primary goodness of existence, in the meaning and value of life. Added to this, there is man's inhumanity to man—the selfishness, cunning, and violence with which some get on and others go down.

Is there a God who sees and permits all this? Is, not simply nature and man, but God cruel also? There is a certain apologetic worth in foregoing alien arguments and in unfolding the content of our Christian faith with reference to this whole matter. Religion, like truth, speaks for itself.

Our world is vastly larger to us than it was to the men of the prescientific age—so vast that our earth is but as a grain of sand on the shore of an infinite sea. But, according to our religion, God rules in and through all this, upholds all by the word of his power, and binds all together. As our world is incomparably greater to us than to our forefathers, must not the God of this greater world be incomparably greater also?

And there are more people, living and dead, than ever before. According to our religion, God knows each secret thought of all and hears every prayer. If we may compare humanity to a great

ocean, we may say that God's thought and care are directed to every drop of this ocean that ever was, is now, or ever shall be. So only is he God at all.

But as soon as we see how great God is we fear that he may be too great. Upholding countless cosmic systems and piloting the history of peoples, we do not quite see how he can have a heart for just us. God's greatness and man's littleness—that thought has often brought a paralyzing sense of human triviality and impermanence. Thus, anxiety, terror, and suffering may easily become our portion.

According to our gospel, however, it need not be so. Since God is so great we may commit not only what is great but what is little to his keeping. God could not care for the whole if he did not care for the part as well. Our times are in his hands. We may trust our lives to him. If we may not, what becomes of our religious faith and hope?

God is greater than our hearts. Men like Auguste Comte forbid us to see anything, to look for anything, beyond a human universe. This world must suffice as our be all and end all. But Comte's "all" is not all—it is an island implying an ocean. The reality and fulness of God, of man, and of the relationship between God and man, this we have lost in our modern world, and must recover. We must overcome the abbreviation and depotentialization of both God and man, the outcome of the naturalistic development of modern centuries. With such a God as the God of the great world of nature and of man must be, if he fulfil the proper functions of God at all, the most improbable becomes probable, the most wonderful the most certain. Because God is infinitely great, we may be sure that he has great things forever in store for us. The thought of the greatness of God is almost indispensable to our faith in eternity. If we fix our eyes upon the dust and the grave, it seems natural to us that we too should pass into dust, like the leaves of autumn. But if God is greater than our hearts, the whole world may be only a parable, a station on the road that leads his child to himself. In the presence of the wonderful God, eternity is no greater a wonder than the leaf on the tree. And the wonder of the soul, which is the mystery of mysteries, in a sense

the creator of our world and the fountain of our life, grows clear to us in the light of the greatness of the God of the soul.

And now a gleam penetrates the gloom of the abyss into which we were peering at the outset. We see in a new light those fearful things which threaten to estrange us from God. Since God is greater than our hearts, often we cannot understand him, often he seems cruel. But he sees farther than we do. He has his plan for each and for all. There is a mysterious and lofty making and building, and, knowing him, we know that it means well. This intimation and certainty of a hidden high meaning in things; this conviction of a divine plan of love, including macrocosm and microcosm alike; this following after God down into the darkness and up into the light; this participation in the building and making and plan-forming and plan-fulfilling—this is the warm heart of religion.

To us those terrible things mentioned at the start are the last; to him they are the tiny part of an endless development. The plan of God is not finished. There is evolution of plan as well as plan of evolution. The future belongs to us, as well as past and present. God who is at the beginning is also at the end. Granting that human history has marched heavily through barbarism and misery—what are a few milleniums of previous history compared with the infinity and eternity at God's disposal? The world is only a beginning. And if my earthly life be clouded with defeat and loneliness and sorrow, is not the child of God the heir of eternity? What seems great to us is small to God; long to us, a moment to him. Indeed an intimation now and then surprises us that precisely what is dark and hard and gruesome in the world is there at all only because infinitely great thoughts pervade them and rule over them; because a divine necessity resides in them; because this is the only way that we can mount aloft and become capable of the glory and sonship of the eternal God.

Man's supreme misery, however, is not the cruelty of the natural order, but a guilty conscience. Is some synthesis possible between the greatness of God and the guilt of man? Our hearts condemn us often enough. We spend sad hours under the weight of our moral impotence or of some single great sin. We know the

message of the grace and mercy of God, we read the parable of the Lost Son, we look upon the cross of Christ—we hear and see, but do not believe. We think we are too guilty. Judgment we can understand but not forgiveness. Now, our only comfort in such distress is the thought that God is greater than our hearts which condemn us. Because he is great he forgives. In Browning's line, "The All-great is the All-loving too."

And so, in whatever direction we explore our subject, we see the importance of a new emphasis upon the greatness of God. It is a thought which should gradually penetrate all our religious thinking. Because God is so great, our hearts must become greater, so that we can apprehend him. Our souls become great and deep through communing with a God of greatness and depth.

But instead of becoming great because God is great, it is easy and common to degrade God to the level of our own littleness. Instead of growing into his likeness, it is easy to fashion him after our own. This is why the God of which the people speak is often so narrow and small. Theology even cannot entirely escape responsibility for this evil. Sometimes theology forces God into a mold. The theologian knows exactly who he is, the mode of his existence, and how he reveals himself. And the mold is used to judge and condemn others who have a different mold, or perhaps no mold at all. Of such as this we are all only too familiar. Now the thought of God should make the heart free, be fresh air and sunshine to the soul; but the God of whom many speak affects us like prison air, or at best, schoolroom air. They impute to him all their own petty, narrow-hearted, sterile, evil thoughts, then come and plague and terrorize men with this God of theirs. To them God becomes a tyrant. But it is not God, it is their own hearts that speak to them thus. They have formed God according to their own natures, instead of humbly letting themselves be formed by God. The pride, wilfulness, obstinacy, selfishness of men have tried to make God in their image, have imprisoned him in books, theories, dogmas, confessions. And it is no wonder the human heart does not love this God, will have nothing to do with him; that, now the heart, now the understanding, repudiates him and rebels against him.

With this in mind we may indeed say that Jesus came to free us from the theologians. We meet and greet the real God in Jesus. In Jesus the heart of God is revealed to us—there or nowhere. In the life and love and death of Jesus we experience God. At that point in the world's history, riddle and darkness are broken through by an impressive and irresistible power, and we recognize the eternal goodness caring for each individual. Two things the cross brings together: the misery of the world and the love of God. Jesus fought against scribe and Pharisee because they made God too narrow and too small, because they pressed God into the mold of their law, and thus excluded the hungry people from his salvation. They did not know the greatness of the love of God, and hence confounded him with the narrowness and hatefulness of their own selves. It is precisely the love of the holy God revealed in Jesus Christ that at once shows us how impure and selfish and petty and small we are, and liberates and redeems and blesses us. And this love is the cure of the hurt of the mind and of the misery of the world.